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Chapter 2

The Setting

131 ALOR is a small and obscure island in the Netherlands East Indies. It lies directly north of central Timor at the end of that long string of land fragments called the Lesser Sundas. More specifically, it is 8 degrees south of the equator and between 124 degrees and 125 degrees longitude east of Greenwich. This places it about halfway between Java and New Guinea in an east-west line and about halfway between Australia and Celebes in a north-south line.

● 132 Alor's climate and vegetation reflect its proximity to the Australian land mass. There are prevailing southeast and northwest winds, with severe monsoon storms as the winds change. The wet season begins with a few thunder showers at the end of October, then works up to a crescendo in January, February, and March, when rains fall in a steady downpour each afternoon, sending sparse rushes down the deeply 221 gouged river canyons. This is the period of planting and intensive weeding.

[12] With the gradual cessation of the rains the temperature falls slightly, and as the rainy season ends, first corn, then rice and beans are harvested. Later still comes the sweet potato season. By the end of the dry season the whole countryside is brown and parched, and finally many of the springs and small rivers dry up. The only important crop of this period is cassava. At this time natives burn over the land to destroy the weeds they have been cutting in their fields and to drive wild pig for communal hunts. Little survives the annual burning-over except esca- 137 lyptus trees and a kind of bindy grass known throughout the Indies as alang alang.

Alor is therefore not lush jungle country. Rich tropical growth is found only in the ravines where there is moisture the year round and where the land is too steep for cultivation—and to natives, land too steep for cultivation means nothing short of the perpendicular.

133 The terrain is so precipitous that one drops easily into accepting it 134 as an explanation for the remarkable diversity of language and culture on this small island. Alor is only about fifty miles long and thirty wide, but it supports a native population of approximately seventy thousand, [17] who speak innumerable dialects of at least eight different languages. 101 Abui is the name given the language of the area from which most of the subsequent descriptive data were drawn. It is fifty miles from the

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Lastly there is a Protestant missionary, whose task is largely administrative. Under him are the casually educated missionary teachers, called gurus, who have been drawn mostly from other islands and who establish the actual proselytizing contacts with the mountain people. It is they who give the rudimentary instruction in Malay and in the three R's furnished in the twenty-five schools scattered throughout the high country. Such a school was in existence from 1925 to 1931 in the village area to be discussed. Then the school disintegrated owing to the hostility of the people to new gurus who replaced the original one. After 1933 only wandering preachers passed through the area. Their influence was minimal since they had no command of the local language and scarcely twenty of the mountain boys understood Malay.

The material that follows in this volume is drawn from a group of mountain people at Atimelang in the Barawshing district. This community lies above the northwest coast in the radjahship of Alor proper. It is only about five and a half miles from the port of Kalabahi as a crow flies, but by trail it is some fifteen miles, which take six to eight hours to cover on foot.

It is native custom in Alor to locate villages on mountain spurs and crests. This formerly furnished some degree of safety in warfare, but it makes water a problem, since springs may be as many as several hundred feet below in the ravine. Villages are usually small; a large one seldom has more than one hundred and fifty inhabitants. Since the pacification of the island by the Netherlanders, there has been some pressure on the natives to move their villages into more accessible locations, preferably on level stretches near the main horse trails that have been built across the island for official use.

The Atimelang complex is such a transposed group. In 1918 the area was embroiled in Alor's most serious war of pacification, which grew out of the murder of the radjah. The government then insisted that the five villages constituting the Atimelang complex move down from the ridges to the floor of an enclosed valley, which gives the impression of being an old volcanic crater. The floor of the valley is at an altitude of some 2500 feet, and the surrounding crest of hills rises between 300 and 500 feet higher. Since in the tropics temperatures drop rapidly with altitude, the thermometer registers usually between 70 and 80 degrees Fahrenheit. During eighteen months of recordings the minimum temperature was 59 degrees and the maximum 86 degrees. The humidity, however, even when the rains are over, is surprisingly high, and during the dry months from June to October the unclad mountain people suffer appreciable discomfort from the cold.